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This study investigates choreographic and performance decisions and philosophies of performing death onstage in four distinct concert dance works: Michel Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (and other recreations), Angelin Preljocaj's *Blanche Neige*, and Maureen Fleming's *Nude Descending Stairs*. I analyze the imagistic and symbolic representations and embodiment of death presented in all of these works through personal observations as well as research of choreographic intention and critical and scholarly reviews. My experiences with these distinct choreographies unearth five perpetuating themes related to philosophical and psychological interpretations of death's social and physical presence: the dramatic death; becoming and transformation with a focus on a shared performance experience; the life/death/rebirth cycle; sacrifice; and gendered portrayals of death. To gain further knowledge of these themes, I created my own performance of death in a piece titled *Elementary Cycles*, which directly involves choreographic ideas and symbols previously explored by other choreographers. This phenomenological approach to danced death not only gives me greater bodily knowledge of the five themes but also reveals the choreographic potentialities, or future choreographic possibilities of staging a dying body, imbedded in this study of performing death.

DECONSTRUCTING THE STAGED DEATH IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY
CONCERT DANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF
CHOREOGRAPHIC POTENTIALITY

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The dying process and the act of death are two events or concepts frequently portrayed in staged dance works. The death of a loved one may be the inspiration for a piece, or the choreographer may wish to spread an activist message about rape, genocide, the death penalty, war, or terminal illness. However, the portrayal of death in staged performances has not often been analyzed by critics and scholars for its choreographic choices of imagery, symbolism, and movement. My research delves beyond the *why* that is so often asked by critics and scholars interpreting death and questions the *how* and *what* of the choreography. What do various ballerinas' performances of Fokine's *Dying Swan* solo reveal about choreographic vision and intention? How are these ideas enhanced or transformed by various performers' interpretations of the movement and/or character? How should or can a dramatic death be portrayed onstage? How do philosophical and religious connections between birth, death, and life intersect with different cultural choreographies of death? What gender constructions are potentially challenged through varying symbolic representations of death and sacrifice?

This research investigates distinct artistic, choreographic choices for the stylization of movement that may create for the audience a model onstage, familiar or unfamiliar, of the death process. Some choreographers may choose to provide a narrative for the audience to explain the death of a character, while others may use non-narrative

formats to investigate more abstract, philosophical questions of death as revealed through the human body. On different points of a spectrum of choreographic possibilities for staging death would be the physical representations of death as a character, such as in Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* (1932), as well as dances created to demonstrate grief over a lost loved one, such as Martha Graham's *Lamentation* (1930). What is important about any dance that involves death is that the choreographer and/or performer copes with this difficult subject through embodiment, a concept many societies do not often value for its possible therapeutic benefits. Although death is certainly encountered in many facets of life, such as religion, literature, and politics, the growing presence of media has arguably allowed many to distance themselves from the bodily experience of death. Though violence and dead bodies are encountered daily through video games, television, and film, these digital projections through a screen create a degree of separation not present when a body is performing a death live.¹

Even as death has remained an important choreographic subject throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, investigations of how a character or performer dances to his or her death are limited. I will be examining the intersections of choreographies of death with gender studies, psychology, and philosophy from a phenomenological perspective. My interest in phenomenology is not to privilege the body as an object of universal truth but to allow for scholarly inquiry through a first-person perspective, as seen in Chapter III (Franko 2011, 2). Similarly, a phenomenological perspective on performances of

1. Further debate of the performance possibilities provided by theatre and technology can be found in the review of literature.

death emphasizes the body as a main source of knowledge for examining experiences and perceptions of dying. As Ann Cooper Albright (2011) explains, “[Phenomenology] is a way of describing the world as we live in it—a philosophical approach that positions the body as a central aspect of that lived experience” (8). In addition, although my investigation largely concentrates on western choreographers and performers, I have chosen to take an intercultural approach to my application of theory when analyzing movement. Thus, although some western philosophy influences my interpretations and analyses, many themes unearthed in this research derive from the Japanese movement practice of *butoh*, a form that often investigates, in both theory and praxis, the dying body. I would like to recognize here that *butoh* developed post-WWII, while two of the works used for this research, *The Dying Swan* and *The Rite of Spring*, premiered prior to this form’s theoretical development. However, I have chosen to investigate these choreographies both from a historical social perspective (acknowledging choreographic trends and audience reception at the time of the works’ premieres) and a contemporary intercultural perspective.

In using the term “choreography” to explain my research of staged deaths, I do not wish to privilege the role of the choreographer over the performer, or even treat choreographer and performer as exclusive categories. While I will not discuss in depth the varying arguments and definitions surrounding this term, I would like to acknowledge that choreography in this paper is used to describe both the creation and the performance of moving bodies. My philosophy of choreography greatly resembles the philosophies of dance educator Margaret H’Doubler, who did not isolate the ideas of creation, practice,

and performance of dance in her teaching practices (Foster 2009, 107-09). As Susan Leigh Foster (2009) explains, “H’Doubler championed the individual’s explanation of the bodily capacity to move. Choreography, as an offshoot of this vital physical inquiry, remained an opaque process, one driven by brilliant vision and need to express the human experience” (108). My own choreographic process for this study, explained in Chapter III, largely draws from the idea of expressing experience through choreography as well as the philosophy that creation and performance can exist within the same space and time.

The first section of this paper reviews literature on the topic of death, specifically cultural and social perspectives on death with special emphasis on the significance of performed death. The second chapter delves into an analysis of dramatic choreographed deaths and their relationship to the concepts of the life/death/rebirth cycle, the transformation of the performer, and the audience experience. Videos, critiques, and choreographic notes serve as resources to supplement my own observations of selected works. In the third chapter, I will describe my own choreographic experiments and performance experiences with danced death in a work titled *Elementary Cycles*. The final chapter discusses choreographic commentaries on the themes of sacrificial and gendered deaths. I conclude with reflections on the choreographic potentialities, or future choreographic possibilities for staging a dying body, that are suggested by this research.

Review of Literature

Many writings on the relationship between art and life help deconstruct possible choreographic representations or investigations of death that are critical to my study.

Susan Feagin believes art primarily functions to teach humans about life, so that fictional objects or actions help humans strive for more knowledge about their own experiences, past, present, and future. She explains, “The question is how we can return to the world of real things with knowledge about it gained from our experience with the artworld” (1995, 20). Feagin, and many other modernists, see art as existing in the world of the aesthetic, ignoring other possible places or events where art has social and personal benefits, such as therapy, political protest, communication, education, and cultural preservation. The technique and performance philosophies of butoh greatly challenge modernist constructions of art’s function and position in life. Butoh co-founder Tatsumi Hijikata believed in his art as a direct experience for the audience, not a symbol or representation of an idea (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 45). Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura explain, “DANCE EXPERIENCE is an approach for butoh practice and a definition of dance as close to the body, a personal experience not accessible through mere observation or interpretation....When butoh involves an audience, it aims to share interpersonal experience” (2006, 101). If a performer is meditating on death, life, and rebirth, the audience would then not necessarily view a narrative or literal representation of these concepts in the movement but would sensuously *experience* the cycle with the dancer.

However, a viewer’s previous experiences also highly affect how he or she can relate to and reflect on a performance. Brandon Shaw cites “movement history, personal psychology, gender, relationships with the performers, proximity to the stage, and previous experience watching dance” as radically influencing the viewer’s experience

and observations of a work (2012, 127). Is, then, the universality that is often assumed in butoh practices a naïve ideal? Butoh practitioners are encouraged to shed the socially constructed body to obtain pure expression; Fraleigh and Nakamura describe the butoh body as “metamorphic essence, incomplete, ongoing and perishing” (2006, 17, 51). Although these may be the meditations of the performers, audiences (particularly western audiences accustomed to a valuing of the mind over the body) may not be focusing on shedding their socially constructed bodies to have the interpersonal experience Hijikata emphasized. Shaw, however, sees the proscenium setting as encouraging a disregard for the material body, arguing that sitting in cushy seats often allows an escape from physical pain and labor:

By sitting we do not enter a realm of passivity, but of receptivity... Thus when we sitting [sic] in comfortable seats and not in a state of pain while focusing on the dancers, we are supremely unaware of our own bodies. One possible effect of this unawareness could be a loosening of our own notions of the restraints of our bodies. (2012, 49)

Although audience members may experience the work differently based on social and cultural background, Shaw’s theory of an escape from bodily awareness lends itself to the beliefs of Hijikata and other butoh practitioners that the performance will be more than just a viewing of a representation onstage but rather an interpersonal and/or empathetic experience for the audience.

The role of art in creating works that help society acknowledge and process death is key to this study. We live now in an age of nuclear weapons in which the entire human race could be wiped out in a matter of minutes, but also an age where media creates “a

realm of all-performance all-the-time” (Phelan 2003, 292). According to Peggy Phelan (2003), media blurs the line between reality and performance by “recording and circulating live events. They [streaming video, web casts, etc.] can give us something that closely resembles the live event but they nonetheless remain something other than live performance” (295). This otherness, besides digitalization, is also a lack of shared, embodied space between the audience and performer (Phelan 2003, 295). However, Philip Auslander (1999) offers an interesting counterargument with the idea that media can actually provide a more intimate setting for an audience in experiencing a work that a live performance may not be able to provide (35). This intimacy, a one-on-one relationship between the individual and the performance through the privacy of, for example, a television screen, has now become a cultural norm at live events as well through media: “The kind of proximity and intimacy we can experience with television, which has become our model for close-up perception, but that is absent from these performances, can be reintroduced only by means of their ‘videation’” (Auslander 1999, 35). Notably, both Phelan and Auslander do not treat live performance and media as separate entities but as two concepts that are now deeply intertwined.

However, Phelan still sees live performance as more intimate due to the relationship between audience and performer, in a limited space where the image is fleeting rather than recorded and where the performance is not for a mass audience (Auslander 1999, 41). This idea of an intimate shared space for a limited audience allows Phelan to go one step further by considering the effect that the audience’s reception and real-time response can have on the performance. Phelan explains, “In live performance,

the potential for the event to be transformed by those participating in it makes it more exciting to me—this is precisely where the ‘liveness’ of live performance matters” (2003, 295). Phelan’s emphasis on transformation supports Hijikata’s and other choreographers’ focus on DANCE EXPERIENCE as an opportunity to establish a relationship between the audience and performer, an idea that is largely explored in my performance reflections in Chapter III.

Despite the interweaving relationship of live performance and media, Robin May Schott (2010a) still observes and emphasizes a great distancing in many societies from the experiences of death and dying:

Since we [humans] ultimately cannot control death, we compartmentalize death and distance ourselves from it and from those who are in the throes of mourning. So while on the one hand the representation of death is omnipresent in the media both in fiction and in news coverage, on the other hand, the practices that orient our relation to dying and death in modern urban societies tend to marginalize death from everyday routines. (19)

Interestingly, Schott acknowledges that feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen believed a distancing from death may be due to a “fascination with death and dying” so that necrophobia and necrophilia intertwine to demonstrate a Western preoccupation with death (2010a, 4-5). From a scientific perspective, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) argues that advances in technology have led to “a society that looks at the masses rather than the individual” (11). Similarly to Phelan’s (2003) argument of the intimacy of shared space versus recordings broadcast to the masses, Kübler-Ross asks, “What is going to become of a society which puts the emphasis on numbers and masses, rather than on the

individual...where the trend is...closed-circuit television teaching, recordings, and movies, all of which can teach a greater number of students in a more depersonalized manner?" (1969, 11). Kübler-Ross acknowledges in these words the mind/body split encouraged by this depersonalization, where the body is not valued as an experiential, important entity or a source of knowledge.

Afraid of a growing depersonalized Western society, Kübler-Ross emphasizes the great value of artistic expression and reflection, specifically concerning death. She explains, "If we could teach our students the value of science and technology simultaneously with the art and science of inter-human relationships, of human and total patient-care, it would be real progress" (1969, 16). Phelan (1997) acknowledges a similar pedagogical opportunity in performance studies for informing audiences of the importance of the *embodied* individual: "...it behooves us to think more seriously about what theatre and performance have to teach us about the possibilities and perils of summoning the incorporeal. To what end are we seeking an escape from bodies? What are we mourning when we flee the catastrophe and exhilaration of embodiment?" (2). Art then may serve to not only help an audience face death but also recognize the importance and value of the individual, material body. Although Kübler-Ross and Phelan write from European-American and American perspectives, respectively, I would argue these concerns could apply to any technologically-centered society.

The question of what it means to face death then enters this discussion of the social benefits or audience reception of performed deaths. Again, whether one believes seeing a death on stage is simply observing a death or is also in some way experiencing

the death with the performer will determine the perspective with which to contemplate the audience's reception of the death. Tristanne Connelly (2011) argues that knowledge of death is gained solely through vision: "Death can only be known to the living through its images; in that sense, death is always spectacular, while it eludes any vision we have of it" (1). Yet Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard argues that we can only begin to understand death by facing our own, not by mourning others or objectifying death (Heinamaa 2010, 81). According to Heinamaa, death seems like an "impossible possibility" since we cannot imagine not existing, nor can we imagine a state of being free from a temporal framework (2010, 81-84). As Robert Kastenbaum (2000) explains, imagining death "requires bridging a tremendous gap: from what I have actually experienced of life to a construction of life's negation. I have not been dead (the state). I have not experienced death (the event). Therefore, the mental operations that I call upon in my efforts to fathom death tend to falsify as they proceed" (35). Kastenbaum later explains the inability of the brain to fathom death because "nothing...is the most elusive object of thought. The mere activity of thought makes something out of nothing" (93). These musings by Heinamaa and Kastenbaum do not take into account religious or other philosophical ideas of continued existence through an afterlife or rebirth following death. However, their statements do equate death with a corpse, an unembodied object, an idea which presents a potential choreographic impass: an inability, due to the body's continuous motion and thoughts, to understand and thus portray how one becomes a corpse.

This limitation on the imagination of the choreographer (as well as the performer), including an inability to come to terms with his or her own death, potentially reduces the performance of death to a symbolic or visual rather than experiential event. Kübler-Ross explains that, “It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth, and if this life of ours has to end, the ending is always attributed to a malicious intervention from the outside by someone else” (1969, 2). This intervention is prevalent in choreographies with narratives—retellings of murder crimes (Agnes De Mille’s *Fall River Legend*, Bill T Jones’ *Chapel/Chapter*) or stagings of battles, murder, or suicide (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Nutcracker*, *La Jeune Homme et La Mort*). Yet some have ventured beyond narrative explanations, such as Kazuo Ohno’s *Admiring La Argentina* and Michel Fokine’s *The Dying Swan*. Certainly, trying to imagine death, either when choreographing and performing movement or in observing a performer, is extremely difficult. As Alan Blum explains, “Death can teach us about the limits of knowledge, for how could we ever know what is death except externally...we only know of death by thinking about the remains and influences of those who are dead; we only know from the perspective of life” (2011, 29). Indeed, not only audience comprehension but also choreographic and performance choices rely only on information from observations and experiences with life. However, the cycle of life, death and rebirth, so strongly emphasized in Ohno’s butoh teachings and found in many religious and philosophical texts, suggests the knowledge of life as quite the suitable substitute for knowledge of death.

Choreographers, then, have numerous choices available for portraying, representing, or referencing death onstage. Notably, they can approach death from historical, moral, psychological, philosophical and medical standpoints, or a combination of these perspectives (Connelly 2011, 2). Another possibility is, “If denial is no longer possible, we can attempt to master death by challenging it” (Kübler-Ross 1969, 13). Often theatrical characterizations and portrayals of death use murder and violence or show great bravery in the face of death. Connelly agrees with Kübler-Ross’s observations of psychological dealings with death: “If death has any worth here, it is as drama: as spectators, we learn about human nature, and we either see a poignant tableau of weakness failing under intense suffering, or an edifying exemplum of noble fortitude prevailing” (2011, 2-3). Certainly this dramatic portrayal of death can be viewed in versions of *The Rite of Spring* and *The Dying Swan* as well as other ballets, revealing “the need and desire to perform at life in the shadow of death, the desire to enact hyperbolically the action that renounces inaction as if unaware, suffering the mix of pleasure and pain that such a pose must inherit” (Blum 2011, 35). These artistic portrayals then may not provide knowledge or experience of the dying process but demonstrate how humans psychologically often choose to deal with the *lack* of knowledge about the end that we all must face.

Differentiations among certain states of dying can also help with negotiating the performance of death. Kastenbaum first explains that “dead is not death. These are related but not equivalent concepts” (2000, 5). He then goes on to acknowledge death’s most common definition and usage as “the passage from alive to dead” (2000, 7).

Marjorie McCoy similarly addresses this issue of word choice, stating, “There is a difference between the act of dying and the event of death itself. The first is a process filled with various particular experiences of livingness. The second is that moment when the vital functions we call life cease” (1974, 37). Based on these clarifications by Kastenbaum and McCoy, I find the act of dying to be the most applicable to an analysis of choreographed death, as the act of death itself would seem to be rather quick and simple: stop moving (which we often see onstage represented by still, supine bodies.) In some choreographies, what occurs after the death (such as a birth or rebirth) may also influence the performer’s portrayal and audience’s reception of a dying body.

However, McCoy’s definition of death, in that it is the end of life, emphasizes the physical differences between the states of alive and dead and the importance of acknowledging necessary indications to rule that someone is dead. McCoy poignantly explains the semiotic limitations when discussing bodily states:

Not only is it difficult to define what *death* is, we also have problems when it comes to defining *life*. There is no way to get outside life to look at it from another perspective. Our vision is limited because we can only view it from within. We can explain life and death, therefore, only in relation to each other. (1974, 143)

These limitations of our language might suggest that displaying the dying process corporeally could be a more accurate depiction than we may ever achieve with words. Kastenbaum explains that death is associated with several observations or feelings, including absence, abandonment, separation, cycles of nature, and lack of responsiveness (2000, 30-31). This lack of responsiveness in a corpse is described in great detail by

David Gere: “Corpses are, by their very nature, inert and still. They lack the will to resist gravity and so, in most Western cultures, they lie supine, as if sleeping...Historically, in the West this supine posture has been likened to rest, as if a sign of relief after the suffering inherent in death” (2004, 194). Hijikata often used the image of a corpse to describe butoh, stating, “Butoh is a dead body standing desperately upright” (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 51). Fraleigh and Nakamura describe Hijikata’s practice as movement initiated “from the feeling of being a corpse” (51). Both Gere and Hijikata acknowledge that the corpse is the ultimate symbol of the body being controlled by the environment (Fraleigh 2010, 67; Gere 2004, 194).

The contrast, indeed, between the upright body and the stooped, fallen, or still body plays a large role in choreographic choices. The tradition of the elongated, upright posture of the ballet dancer harkens to the style’s beginnings in court dance, when the nobility believed a tall and erect body indicated a mind’s proximity to God and heaven. Ballerinas then continued to transcend the mortal confines of gravity and earth by lifting themselves up on pointe shoes to skim across the stage. *The Dying Swan*, for example, indicates that the bird is close to her death due to her inability to take flight, instead collapsing to the ground several times. Butoh, however, provides a different transcendence from the body that accepts rather than challenges mortality:

Butoh dancers deconstruct the physical in morphing from image to image and project the body toward *nothingness*; theirs is not an ethereal escape from the body as in classical ballet of the West. It is a transformative process that accepts change, just as nature (human and non-human) is also a study in time and space, decay, death, and regeneration. (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 50)

The ultimate downfall of the ballerina is death, yet the butoh dancer understands that death cannot stand alone; rather, death is infinitely linked to life and rebirth, a constant metamorphic and cyclical process. These ideas of transformation and the life/death/rebirth cycle will be explored further through deeper movement analysis in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

PERFORMANCES OF DEATH, PART I

Movement analysis, with a specific focus on choreographic choices, requires careful viewing of dances while also considering artistic intention, social and cultural influences, and personal aesthetics. This chapter dives deeply into movement description and analysis of selected works in relation to the themes of dramatic death, becoming/transformation, experiential performance, and the life/death/rebirth cycle.

Dramatic Death

Choreographers in early twentieth century ballets often portrayed death dramatically, with great expressiveness from the performers. Two excellent examples include Michel Fokine's *The Dying Swan* and Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre Du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). Dramatic deaths metaphorically and symbolically represent a dying body. Instead of attempting to experience death, the choreographers and performers highlight the physicality of the death through great technical demands. The drama of the dance demonstrates fatigue and struggle to the viewer; whether the performer is actually attempting to embody death matters not to the choreographer. As Fokine explains about *The Dying Swan* solo, "It was the combination of masterful technique with expressiveness. It was like a proof that the dance could and should satisfy not only the eye, but through the medium of the eye should penetrate into the soul" (1931, 134).

Through visual imagery and majestic choreography, the performance symbolizes a death without the performer necessarily attempting to embody the dying process.

The dramatic choreography of Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, originally set on Anna Pavlova,² has been largely brushed over by scholars and historians as fluffy and cliché and thus not worthy of extensive movement analysis. As Jennifer Fisher (2012) explains, "...the Swan could be deemed a decorative image, not an especially significant one" (60). The film Fisher analyzed in her research is Pavlova's *Dying Swan* recorded in 1924. In the video, Pavlova enters with a dramatic flap of her wings and throws her head back. Her arms stretch high to the sky with limp wrists before she falls to a kneeling position on the ground and dramatically arches back, teetering precariously. As she rises, she suddenly flings her crossed arms to the side and upwards as if she is trying to take flight; she is able to maintain her course for a few seconds, bourréeing while her arms ripple at shoulder level, continuing to gaze longingly at the sky.

Once again, her soaring momentum runs out, and she throws her arms straight above her head, hanging from her fingers as if attempting to remain airborne. She collapses into a lunge and arches back. The dramatic abandon in these arches, as well as (perhaps unintentional) faltering balance, demonstrates a creature desperate for life, flailing for her survival. This time, it takes her a moment to rise, struggling to support her own body weight. Her flight only lasts for two flaps of her wings, and as she realizes her life is dwindling, her wrists flip over for the first time, hands pleading towards the sky.

2. The exact date of the premiere of the solo is debatable. Fokine claims to have choreographed the solo for Pavlova in 1905, whereas record of the performance cannot be found by historians before 1907.

She collapses onto her right knee, her body folded dramatically between her legs, tutu upwards left.

With a surge of energy, she is up on pointe twirling again to face upstage, bourréeing back with vigorous flapping of the arms, but her head continues to droop backward, lolling slightly from side to side on the neck. The symmetry maintained in her upper body for most of the solo now begins to falter, the upper body swaying, one wing trying to flap, then the other. The ballet aesthetic begins to crumble before the viewer's eyes, so that the swan and ballerina, both symbolized in one body, are dying simultaneously. Her legs manage to maintain their bourrée, skimming across the water, even as her upper body gives way, her arms folding across each other to the right, the head looking down reluctantly to the ground. She rotates in a semi-circle to face the audience, ceases her bourrées, and lifts her arms one last time, her body stretching as far as it can go, reaching to the sky, palms inward. The arms gracefully open to the side to allow her one more attempt to take flight, yet she falls to her right knee, her head cradled in the crook of her right elbow, the left wrist dangling lifelessly to the side. Her left leg collapses underneath her to sit for the first time fully on the ground, the body leaning dangerously to the right. Her final movement brings the left arm to join the right, the body fully collapsed over the legs.

In heavily relating the solo to the iconic swan of the nineteenth-century romantic ballet era, the viewer can miss the intent of the choreography, described by Fokine (1925) as an artistic portrayal of the final moments of life. Fokine, in his notes and photographs from 1925, explains that in the solo “perfect technique is only the means of expressing

the higher artistic purpose—the creation of the poetic image—the creation of a symbol—the symbol of the everlasting struggle in this life of all that is mortal” (4). Later in his detailed description of the piece, Fokine explains that Pavlova’s moment of complete stillness near the end of her solo is “in an effort to rise,—to escape from the unavoidable” (5). Isabelle Fokine, Michel Fokine’s granddaughter, similarly describes the solo as “someone who is attempting to escape death” (Thomas 2004, 40). Yet Fisher, although acknowledging the fear of life and death portrayed in Pavlova’s dramatic performance, describes the death as gentle, beautiful, and graceful rather than as a struggle (2012, 58-59). These differing views on the portrayal of the death demonstrate not only difference in translation from choreographic intent to performance but also the transformation of performance interpretations over time, influenced by changing social and cultural perspectives.

While seemingly over-the-top and only technically adequate in today’s time, Pavlova’s dramatic performance of Fokine’s choreography carries great social commentary about the early 20th century performer and audience. Fisher explains her altered perspective of the performance after watching the video several times:

I suddenly got a feeling of Pavlova’s power in the role, not always easy to see in this age when dramatic styles tend to be more subtle and technique more exacting...Her baldly dramatic appeal to the audience at one point in *The Dying Swan*, stretching out her arms with head tilted in agony, may seem mawkish in this age of more muted acting styles. But it was at this moment in the dance that I shifted into a mood that her gaze penetrated... I could suddenly understand how it embodied fears of life and death for her audiences. I could imagine how Pavlova’s grace and power until the end might strike a universal chord, after which, the tension could be released in an orgy of applause celebrating the life of the performer. It might draw the reluctant ballet-goer to think about the body’s fragility; it

might sustain the dreams of a woman who could not vote and wanted to command respect; or it might introduce the concept of poetry to someone lost in the mundane procedures of survival. (2012, 59)

Certainly, Pavlova's performance appears outdated a century later, but her role as a figure not necessarily embodying death but dramatizing the fear, suffering, and pain associated with viewing a death points to a society not yet scientifically and technologically removed from the dying body. Rather than attempting to show the audience a body dying at close proximity, an intention that develops later in the 20th century by choreographers such as Bill T. Jones and Pina Bausch, Fokine's choreography arguably acts as a therapeutic release for viewers.

Audiences did not come to the theater to see their everyday lives but to be lifted to an emotional and aesthetic level above their daily viewings. Fokine, following modernist thoughts on art's social functions, emphasizes the importance of this distinction between reality and performance in describing the ballerina's necessary qualities:

Any realistic expression of physical suffering must be entirely excluded. The life gesture from which the dance is developed must be raised above the everyday realism to aesthetic heights. Making the dance an imitation of the bird is a mistake which has been made by many performers. The more unrealistic and emotional the execution, the loftier and more beautiful will be the impression conveyed. (1925, 14)

Again, the goal of dramatic deaths is not necessarily a recreation of reality but aesthetic symbolism through technique and expression. Isabelle Fokine reiterated her grandfather's intention by stating that the solo "is not about a swan, it is about death and the swan is simply a metaphor for that" (Thomas 2004, 40). The swan, the ballerina, and the stage

generate a fictitious world for the audience to briefly immerse themselves in; *The Dying Swan*, in lacking any radical choreographic experimentation, meets the early 20th century audience's expectations for performance aesthetics and escapism.

While Fokine's choreography (or Pavlova's different improvisations of his given poses) may not have been avant-garde in its movement, it differed in its structure from the Petipa era due to the solo's lack of narrative context. This somewhat abstract portrayal of death arguably gave both the performer and the viewer more breadth for interpretation and empathy. Fokine claims that "The dance was composed in a few minutes. It was almost an improvisation. I danced in front of her, she directly behind me. Then she danced and I walked alongside of her, curving her arms and correcting details of poses" (Fokine 1956, 134). This improvisation not only allowed Pavlova to incorporate her own dramatic flair, such as her signature arm gestures, but also to play with her portrayal of the character. Ballet historian Tim Scholl notes that "Fokine's swan has no story. The choreographer adapts the full-length ballet's stylization, while omitting its narrative pretext. The pathos of Fokine's choreography lies in this muteness; death is presented as such, without motivation or consequence" (1994, 46). Scholl even goes as far as calling the solo a staging of "the demise of the nineteenth-century ballet's most potent symbol" (47), an idea I also noted in my earlier movement description.

The lack of plot or narrative surrounding the swan's death has allowed for many interpretations of the solo. Alicia Markova wore a ruby brooch to indicate that the swan had been shot. Natalia Makarova explained that dancing the solo required "total emotional abandon, conveying the image of a struggle with death or a surrender to it"

(Makarova 1979, 119). Struggle and surrender are two distinct inner modes for portraying the swan's final moments – a surrender would certainly lend itself to Fisher's interpretation that Pavlova's swan "succumbed to death gracefully" but would not line up with Fokine's intention of the swan wishing to escape death (Fisher 2012, 58). Dame Ninette de Valois, who claimed to have preserved the solo's choreography from 1911, believed that the swan was struggling against the current and drowning (Arnott and Brooks 2007, 29).

Yet Maya Plisetskaya, who became famous for dancing this solo internationally, was not taught the choreography by anyone, choosing to improvise the dance herself. She claims to have danced the solo differently every time, heavily influenced by the music, with each instrument determining a mood or character (*Maya Plisetskaya: Diva of Dance*, interview). In one video, she enters with her back to the audience, the arms very slowly building up then scooping down, always shoulder then forearm then wrist.³ The waves increase in speed as well as decrease in expanse until she slowly raises her arms up, head inclined towards the sky, body seemingly hanging from her wrists. She circles her wrists, her arms dropping down as she spins towards the audience to gaze longingly at the moonlight. As the violin drops out of its long note, the arms ripple gently to match the steady arpeggios of the cello.

Fast bourrées pull her back, tailbone first, sequencing into a spin led by the chest and neck. She prepares to fly, her head craned upwards with her mouth open. She tries to

3. The year of this performance was not noted on the DVD. The video can be found on *Maya Plisetskaya: Diva of Dance* produced in 2006 by EuroArts Music.

piqué and fly twice, both times ending futilely in a lunge, the arms bent at the elbows. Her third piqué arabesque lingers, her arms pressed down towards her back while her head arches up. She runs back, fouettés, but crumples to the floor, her left leg extended straight forward, body collapsed over, both arms reaching back with the wrists broken so the hands face the shoulder blades. As the arms remain back, the left leg slowly sweeps around in a ronde de jambe on the ground to an arabesque. The back slowly arches up, the arms lifting forward and up to reach into a back arch with the elbows slightly bent. The arms come together at the wrists, and she leaves her arms there as she lifts her chest up by her sternum. She rocks gently side to side as her arms wave one, then the other, her upper body falling forward over her right leg. At this moment, the graceful technique demonstrated by Plisetskaya begins to fail; similarly to Pavlova, Plisetskaya symbolizes her swan's approach towards death through the deteriorating technique of the ballerina. The arm flopping increases in speed to bring her left leg back around to the front and stand, the momentum propelling her into another attempt to fly.

She bourrées backward once again, and as she faces around to the moonlight, her fingers suddenly become separated, arms rippling side to side rather than up and down. She drops them resolutely down to her side before, in one last plea, she raises her arms overhead, facing upstage. Her hands cross in a diamond shape while her head falls back into an arch. The bourrées slow; she takes a few steps towards the moonlight, then freezes, her face panic-stricken. Tremors begin in her hands, continuing up into her shoulders. She falls into a lunge, her upper body teetering to the right, left arm up, right leg extended. The left arm comes forward as the right continues to ripple feebly until an

energy surges through that completely straightens it, as if in *rigor mortis*. As the right arm drops, the swan dies, Plisetskaya ending in the same pose as Pavlova.

Although Plisetskaya demonstrates what we may now regard as a more modern technical prowess in her execution of the solo, the technique at times diminishes the dramatic expression of the movement. The control she demonstrates within lingering piqué arabesques and immense flexibility and strength of the shoulders and back removes some of the fictitious façade of the theater, reminding the viewer of the reality of Plisetskaya's healthy, young body. The same reality of the youthful body appears in Nijinsky's *Sacre*, in which the vitality of the sacrificial virgin is purposefully emphasized within the choreography.⁴ Kate Elswit views this demonstration of life as an obstacle for the audience in perceiving a performance of death onstage. She states that "the animation of life...complicates death's authenticity and finality," yet her anxiety about the failure to achieve true *rigor mortis* in a performance narrows her focus to only seeing how dance is *not* death (Elswit 2009, 78). Earlier in her article, Elswit explains:

What becomes visible in performances that stage death is that spectacles of the real demand to be perceived as authentic by displaying the performers' bodies at their physical limits; but approaching those limits simultaneously reinforced and challenged their necessary illusions. (2009, 75)

Thus, Elswit believes that an emphasis on life accentuates death but does not allow the performer to embody death. However, in dramatic deaths, the question is not whether the

4. All observations of Nijinsky's choreography comes from notes collected by Millicent Hodson and the video of Hodson's reconstruction on the Joffrey Ballet in 1987.

performer feels like he or she is dying or is experiencing death, but whether the audience observes a death through the dancer's outward display.

In Nijinsky's original *Sacre* choreography, the virgin, after standing in stillness for the beginning of the ritual, jumps and spins herself to death for five minutes. Representative of Nijinsky's plastique choreographic style, the virgin jumps sideways to remain two-dimensional, feet tucked under the hips, arms slicing jaggedly through the air. In the video, Beatriz Rodriguez (as the Chosen One) juxtaposes the fear of the virgin with the strength of the Chosen One's technique, at times trembling in fear with eyes bulging, at other moments jumping high towards the heavens. The dramatic situation is heightened by Stravinsky's cacophonous score and the imposing presence of the elders surrounding the Chosen One. Her efforts to resist gravity (that which ties us to the earth and accentuates our mortality) drain her life force. Martha Graham's version from 1984 drains her virgin not through physical exhaustion but instead through the mystical powers of a mysterious shaman. The choice of maiden is simple; the shaman overlooks the mating dances until he suddenly plucks one woman off the back of her partner. As the shaman cruelly torments the Chosen One, her upper body convulses, her chest squirming, as if her heart is racing too quickly for her body. The Chosen One dances a frenetic solo several times, collapsing on the floor, on the stairs, and on the shaman's cape before her final death at the foot of the tree. Similarly, Pina Bausch's victim in her *Sacre* is chosen by the alpha male of the community; they dance a short duet before she continues on in a frenzied solo that results in her death. Though the choreographers' commentaries differ on how society views death and victims, all three represent death through the loss of the

essence and energy that fuels our bodies. This idea is similar to performance studies scholar Shelley Berg's conclusion that in the Chosen One's solo, the choreographers have magically transformed "human matter into pure energy" (1988, 150).

Angelin Preljocaj's *Blanche Neige* concludes with a similar dying scene to *The Right of Spring*, although much shorter in length. The evil queen, finally defeated, is dragged into the castle ballroom by two guards. They hold her down while a pair of smoking, burning-hot shoes are carried out ceremoniously and placed on her feet. In thirty seconds, she jumps and spins to her death, hair flying, legs bent beneath her, a crazed look on her face as the pain takes over, causing her to stumble. As the curtain lowers, she collapses in a heap, legs broken beneath her. The stage darkens, and smoke slowly pours over her still body. In an already highly fictitious world, where magic mirrors show beautiful bodies, a queen can harm with a single menacing glance, and a doe is sent to act as a sacrifice for a princess, the act of killing the evil queen does not need to portray a realistic dying process to fit the narrative. A dramatic, magical one certainly suffices to give the audience members the satisfying conclusion they crave (notably, Preljocaj makes this evil queen a one-dimensional symbol of vanity and jealousy, leaving little to no room for audience sympathy.)

In *Sacre*, Nijinsky, Graham, and Bausch (as well as others) attempt to develop audience sympathy for the Chosen One; there is no suggestion that she deserved an early death, and all three soloists express great fear in their selection and dying process. However, these choreographies vary in their narrative portrayal of the Chosen One as a victim or martyr in the community. Arguably, different performers' interpretations of the

solos have proven just as important as the actual movement for demonstrating choreographic intention. In Hodson's reconstruction of Nijinsky's original choreography, she claims, "The solo as he constructed it is heroic, not pathetic" (1996, xi). Berg emphasizes that reviewers described Bronislava Nijinska as more dramatic and victimized in her interpretation of Massine's virgin than Lydia Sokolova, who presented herself as a martyr (1988, 74). Similarly, Christine Daikin is described as a "passive victim" in her portrayal of Graham's Chosen One while Terese Capucilli was a "participant-martyr" (Goldberg 1986, 21). The explanation for these different approaches to the choreography could be the dancer's personal relationship to death and fate. Like Pavlova's freedom of interpretation in *The Dying Swan*, the soloists could play with the narrative of the death: was the Chosen One an unlucky victim of a crazed society or a courageous and faithful woman who lays down her life for a greater being? As Goldberg explains, "The myth as represented by Graham focuses on the virgin's struggle to come to terms with the sacrificial role" (1986, 21). Graham's choreography seems to point to an unlucky victim who is unwilling to accept her fate, and who struggles against the ritual every step of the way. However, looking at this from a hero vs. martyr perspective may be too simplified, as Fisher (2007) notes in her description of the ballerina: "It is tempting to see her as an 'either/or' proposition—that her strength is either masked or evident, that she is either frilly or powerful, that she is either in charge or swooning in someone's arms" (11-12). This returns to the scholarly dismissal of *The Dying Swan* as a superfluous solo holding little academic merit. Dramatization is certainly only one choreographic choice for performing death onstage, but its emphasis on emotional expression through

symbol and metaphor, rather than through a dying process made to appear or be experienced as real, makes it no less important for choreographic analysis and investigation than other performances of death.

Transformation/Becoming: The Experiential Death

While dramatic deaths rely on metaphors and codes of symbols, other dances negate these ideas in an attempt to embody the dying process and allow the audience to experience death through more than just visual perception. Butoh dancers delve deeply into a performance of becoming, in which the body is acknowledged as constantly in transition. Fraleigh and Nakamura (2006) explain, “Butoh does not ride on metaphor, but rather on change and an *ethos* of becoming” (72). This idea of transformation largely relies on the immateriality of body, with the spirit and the body intertwined:

[The immaterial body] is also the butoh body in its metamorphic essence, incomplete, ongoing and perishing in each step, not an essence that we safely resolve nor an object that we conquer as we might strive to conquer in nature, but the body as encompassing spirit and enigma. (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 51)

Of course, objects and bodies can still signify ideas, but unlike dramatic deaths, this is no longer the primary focus of the dance. Instead, one is embodying an image, experiencing death, ideas that both Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata greatly practiced in their dancing.

Hijikata in particular emphasized the concept of DANCE EXPERIENCE, explained earlier as an experience that goes beyond visual observation. Fraleigh and

Nakamura explain, “Art as experience is more than art as symbol or inference; direct experience is the aim of art that goes by the name of ‘Experience’ in the avant-garde of Hijikata’s day” (2006, 45). The performance can be a first-person experience of self-observation in states of transformation or a shared experience with audience members (Fraleigh and Nakamura, 101). Furthermore, the experience goes beyond art as aesthetic to art as understanding, knowledge, and being. The potential this creates for choreography, or improvisation as choreography, will be explored through Maureen Fleming’s *Nude Descending Stairs* and the opening scene of Preljocaj’s *Blanche Neige*.

Fleming’s work, *Nude Descending Stairs*, sometimes shortened to just *The Stairs*, is a seven minute exploration of a slow journey down a staircase. Her reference to Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* can be seen in her continuous motion and constant metamorphosis. Her body, unclothed, spirals down the stairs as if floating, her back often arched as her limbs extend out in circles through space. Philip Glass’s *Metamorphosis II* complements the circular nature of the movement through its repetitive cycling between low notes underlying the melody. Fleming, who studied under Ohno and danced with Min Tanaka, descends the stairs one inch at a time, allowing the audience time to explore and experience every step with her. As of April 2014, Fleming states on her website, “The goal of my work is to reveal the transcendent through images which focus on the human body as a vehicle of transformation.” Her use of the word ‘transformation’ can be interpreted in several ways; she could, for example, be describing a transformation of the body as it journeys downward, yet with her ending pose

replicating her beginning, arguably no transformation of Fleming's body occurred except for its spatial relation to the stairs.

However, a transformation within the viewer can also occur as he or she experiences the work with Fleming. Tresca Weinstein, from an interview with Fleming, explains that Fleming's work could be the impetus for "viewers to experience a shift in the way they see the world, and themselves" (Weinstein 2012). For example Fleming's work could be seen as a slowed version of a painful fall down stairs; to shift one's perspective of time is to then experience the beauty in the fall, the art of death, or even the excruciating journey of life. If, as Robin May Schott explains, "humans can be said to be born dying, and the threat of death is already present in the first hour of life", then *The Stairs* embodies this continuous journey towards death, a constant descent, sometimes head first, sometimes tail first, more difficult at certain moments than at others, but always downwards (2010a, 3).

One could argue that this solo is also an example of a dramatic death, even if it does also place value in the audience's experience of the work beyond the visual. The stairs are highly symbolic in nature, though symbolic in a multitude of ways (descent into hell, descent down the birth canal, journey from one place to another, etc.). Fleming's technique from her classical ballet training, including pointed toes, highly controlled limbs, and extreme flexibility and contortion of the body, could create a similar barrier to reality as *The Dying Swan*. In several moments of *The Stairs*, Fleming even has her hands reaching upwards, palms facing inward, head lolling back, in a similar pleading motion to that seen in Pavlova's performance. Yet Fleming's heightened emphasis on the body as

the focus of the performance—its potentiality, its limitlessness, its constant motion—allows the viewer a window into the experience that other dramatic dances may not. Fleming’s body is not a character but an image, a body in a constant state of becoming and transformation, even if these states are not always attainable by human bodies lacking in flexibility or muscular control.

Angelin Preljocaj’s choreography of the death of Snow White’s birth mother similarly contains dramatic elements, but unlike earlier ballets, moves beyond metaphor to a realistic portrayal of the pains of childbirth, an experience shared by performer and audience through the mother’s careful, weighted movements. Preljocaj has often used motherhood as a theme in his works, but in *Blanche Neige*, he specifically explores the pregnant body. He explains,

La maternité est quelque chose qui parle du corps en métamorphose. C’est un corps qui est porteur d’un être qui va naître et je trouve qu’évacuer cette question du champ chorégraphique serait vraiment dommage.
 (“Angelin Preljocaj”, 3)

Maternity is something that speaks of the body in a state of metamorphosis. It’s a body that is carrier of a being who is going to be born and I find that to take this question away from the choreographic field would truly be a shame.

This transformational state of motherhood begins the piece, with Snow White’s mother slowly walking across a stage filled with smoke, her breathing heavy, her body weighted and grounded. She is covered from head-to-toe in black, including black lace veiling her face. As she walks, her hands clasped protectively over her swollen belly, a contraction causes her to double over in pain. She arches up from her head as she exhales, her arms

extending up to the sky as a loud clap of thunder sounds. She continues onward slowly, her spine rippling, until a contraction brings her down to her knees. Her breathing intensifies and she tries to rise but fails. She continues on crawling, first on her stomach, then on her back, writhing while pushing herself onward with her legs until she rolls to her side, facing upstage. The baby is born; she rolls over to face the audience, Snow White cradled in her arms, and dies.

The death of the mother, even in a fairytale so heavy with narrative, is never explained. Why was she alone at this moment? Was she trying to escape from something, to deliver her child in safety? Did she die from childbirth, or was she already sick? Yet this abstraction from narrative allows Preljocaj to explore the pregnant body, the birthing body, without distraction by a story or other characters. The amplified heavy breathing of a woman suffering in pain and agony, as well as the arching and contracting of the spine, accentuate the realistic difficulties of childbirth and the strain placed on the mother's body. Juliane Link explores Preljocaj's choice to choreograph this scene:

Il soulève aussi des problématiques oubliées ou inexplorées de la grammaire chorégraphique actuelle, comme celle de la représentation de la mort sur scène. Comment donner corps à cette présence de la mort symboliquement et physiquement? Un corps mort, qui n'est plus un corps qui danse, mais qui reste un corps réel, une dépouille, avec une densité, un poids, une existence. (2008)

It also raises forgotten or unexplored issues of the current choreographic vocabulary, such as the one of the representation of death onstage. How does one give body to this presence of death symbolically and physically? A dead body, which is no longer a body that dances, but that remains a real body, a corpse, with a density, a weight, an existence.

The stylized movement of the mother's death is very specifically choreographed, with distinct lighting, sound, and costuming choices. The viewer experiences both the struggle against gravity in the simple pedestrian walking and crawling as well as the death signified by the sudden stillness of the mother after birthing Snow White. The realistic portrayal of this mother's death in childbirth stands in stark contrast to the magical, dramatic death of the Evil Queen that concludes the piece. To frame his work with these two deaths, so different in cause and embodiment, demonstrates the transformation caused by time; a mother dies to birth an innocent child while a step-mother dies out of jealousy and vanity for the woman that this child has become. Transformation and aging of women will be explored in greater detail in Chapter IV.

Life/Death/Rebirth Cycle

As already hinted at in the previous section, life, death, and birth are all deeply connected through transformation. Fleming's *Nude Descending Stairs* is an intentional simultaneous embodiment of a descent to death as well as a birthing of a body. Tresca Weinstein's interview with Fleming revealed that "her choreography, Fleming says, grows out of 'archetypal images, when it's possible to see birth and death at the same time.' In "The Stairs," performed nude, she descends a series of steps in slow-motion curves; the piece could be seen as a metaphor for the end of life or for its beginning" (2012). The two ideas, end and beginning, do not need to be separated if they are viewed as together on an unending cycle. As Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (2010) explains, "Personal death is a transfiguration of life, and not a transition to inert, lifeless matter. Life and

death are together one vital energy, not two opposing forces” (179). Similarly, Schott (2010b) emphasizes the limitations in thinking of birth and death as a dualism:

In ordinary understanding, we often treat birth and death as opposites. They are at opposite ends of the life-cycle, with the concept of birth marking beginnings and origins, while the concept of death marks endings and separation. Yet scholars of myth and religion have long since pointed to the ways in which these concepts are deeply embedded in one another (26).

Thus, life, death and birth are all interconnected in a cycle, one that has been explored by several choreographers. Butoh dancers often use the life/death/rebirth cycle as a main theme in performances and teachings. Fraleigh and Nakamura explain that butoh is “a cultural disposition that appreciates the ongoing nature of life and the life/death/life cycle, never-ending in solid form, because it comes from emptiness, itself not really empty, but in process of emptying and filling, like the process of breathing” (2006, 72). Death as a rebirth can also be found, as Schott stated, in many religious teachings and beliefs, so that death is not an end but a new stage of becoming.

Kazuo Ohno in particular concentrated on the life/death/rebirth cycle through his Christian beliefs (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 25). In his performances and teachings, he often related his experiences back to his mother’s womb. He speaks about it as an essential aspect of transformation:

I don’t believe that the body can transform itself, unless it undergoes the fundamental changes of life and death. Therefore, when I try to prove my own existence it is impossible not to follow the thread of my memories until I reach my mother’s womb: for it is there that my life began. So I try to carry in my body all the weight and mystery of life; and I believe dance is born of this experience. (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988, 41)

He performs these ideas in his piece titled *My Mother*, in which “he carries his dying mother in his arms or on his back. Over and over, they cross the border which separates life and death, and as the music becomes gentler, they walk together towards rebirth” (Viala and Masson-Sekine, 44). The importance of the pregnant mother as a site of life and death was also explored by Preljocaj in *Blanche Neige*, the mother’s death and the daughter’s birth the same event in a moment of transformation and becoming for both. Luce Irigaray’s writing, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other”, explores this mother-daughter relationship of death and birth: “And the one doesn’t stir without the other. But we do not move together. When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive” (1981, 67). The daughter carries on an image of the mother, so that the mother becomes reborn through the daughter. Similar to *Blanche Neige*, Ohno’s piece *Admiring La Argentina*, which pays homage to a woman, La Argentina, whose performances inspired Ohno early in life, also places death and birth in the same time and space. Ohno, dressed as La Argentina, “covers the ground with her cape and gently lies down upon it to die. Death is followed by birth: the old woman recalls her childhood and is transformed into a young girl—La Argentina—who throws herself joyfully into youth and life” (Viala and Masson-Sekine, 31). Ohno and Preljocaj choreograph a death bringing new life through an obvious transformation and transfer of energy between two bodies.

Nijinsky's *Sacre* also demonstrates death giving life, but not for another body—for an entire community. The idea of the sacrifice is much more abstract in its relation of life and death. Modris Eksteins describes the emotions surrounding Nijinsky's sacrifice:

Rebirth, life, and death were depicted without obvious ethical comment...In this portrayal of the continuity of life, fundamental, brutal, and tragic, beyond individual fate, there was no suggestion of sentiment....The victim was not mourned but honored. (Eksteins 1989, 50)

The sacrificial virgin's death gives new life and vitality to the community, with the spring sacrifice of a female to the gods ensuring good crops for the tribe. Here, death arguably has an even greater impact on not one life but many. Thorgeirsdottir explains, "Life goes on, with the individual existence that comes between birth and death merely being one stage thereof. Once it is over, that existence is transformed into other forms of life" (2010, 177). The greater significance of sacrifice in choreographed deaths will be explored in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER III

CHOREOGRAPHING DEATH: *ELEMENTARY CYCLES*

For this phenomenological study, the bodily experience of theory, or exploring perception through lived experience, helps dispel a mind/body split in which the mind of the scholar is privileged over the body of the scholar even when investigating questions of bodily movement. When first studying versions of *The Rite of Spring*, I not only learned Millicent Hodson's reconstructed Sacrificial Virgin solo but I also choreographed a piece titled *Rights of Spring*. This work explored gender roles and female communion while humoring dramatic portrayals of sacrifice in Nijinsky, Graham, and Bausch's choreographies. However, when my focus narrowed to staged deaths, a different choreographic experience was needed in which my primary goal was to perform a death. From my studies, I envisioned an improvisatory piece (in the sense that I would not practice the movement prior to performance) that embraced the four main concepts explored in the previous chapter: dramatic death, life/death/rebirth cycle, transformation/becoming, and experiential performances. This new piece, entitled *Elementary Cycles*, generated a deeper corporeal understanding of the ideas presented in this paper, while also serving as a choreographic experiment in allowing an audience to experience a slow death at close proximity.

Conception

Although all of my readings and investigations influenced the conceptualization of this piece, the teachings and practices of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno were the most prominent inspiration. I wished for my experience as a dying body to be shared by the audience, taken from Hijikata's concept of DANCE EXPERIENCE. Thus, when creating the work, I envisioned the dance happening in the round and in a small, enclosed space, allowing audience members to feel intimate with the performer but also free to determine when and how to enter the space, how long to remain, where to watch the work, proximity to the performer, etc. Fraleigh and Nakamura explain the relation of choreography to experience:

Meaning in butoh comes through one's experience of the dance, and not from deciphering a message or choreographic intent. Surely there is an element of subjective reflection in being an audience for any kind of dance, but Hijikata and Ohno are the first to proffer wholly experiential avenues for relating to dance. (2006, 72)

This subjective reflection I also wanted to acknowledge in the piece by placing at the forefront the personal experiences and memories of the audience members. I conceived that I could prompt audience members to construct a memorial to their loved ones within my chosen space, which ended up being a vacant office.

Although the space would start with only a single candle lighting the room, a flame representing my life and light, I imagined audience members lighting small candles of their own to place in an outline of my body. To conclude the piece, I would slowly lie down inside of this outline on the floor, surrounded by the life forces of those who had

passed, the dead welcoming the living and illuminating the path of the dying. I was also intrigued by Ohno's belief in flowers "as the most ideal form of existence" (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 97). I had already been contemplating the many symbolic possibilities of flowers as offerings of congratulations, of well wishes, and of condolences. The meaning and significance of these flowers change depending on the occasion.

Additionally, cut flowers have been disconnected from their source of life, condemned to an existence of only a few more days. I thus dismissed the idea of using real flowers, or even fake flowers, and opted to construct origami lotus flowers, which would each hold a connection to the performer (who folded them), the audience member, and the remembered loved one. Ohno often used lotuses, as they are believed in yoga to open "the seventh energy system of the body at the crown of the head, extending the body into pure spirit" (Fraleigh and Nakamura, 98). The lotuses were offered as symbols of both life and death, with audience members instructed to write the names of those who had passed on the bottom of the flower before floating them in a bowl of water.

I also wished to convey the ideas of the life/death/rebirth cycle and transformation/becoming within the performance space. I decided to construct visual presentations on the walls to relate these ideas, similar to *butoh-fu*. *Butoh-fu* were used by both Hijikata and Ohno, with Hijikata's recorded as "visual/poetic images used as the basis for butoh movement and gestures...used to guide the dancer or inspire dance movement and choreography" (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 54). These *butoh-fu* were often collections of pictures, words, and poetry that Hijikata compiled as notations of his works. Ohno similarly used *butoh-fu* in the forms of short writings and poems that then

inspired his performances (Fraleigh and Nakamura, 59). I thus decided to create my own *butoh-fu* to meditate on before my performance as well as to display for my audience. The following poems, quotes, and ideas were written on long, narrow pieces of cloth and hung on the four walls of the office:

Transformational
What is death?
A new beginning

D
E
A
T
H
T
R
I
B

Nothingness –
the inconceivable

“our lives are
carried
by the
thousands of
dead
who came before us”
-Ohno Kazuo

The first and second directly relate to the life/death/rebirth cycle as well as demonstrate through their words and structures the ideas of becoming and transformation. The third *butoh-fu* represented the inability to fully understand death, to imagine nothing. The

audience and myself, not having actually experienced dying, could relate to death in that space through personal viewings of someone dying or a dead body and through experiencing my performance of a body slowing, stooping, and eventually lying supine on the floor in stillness. The fourth *butoh-fu*, a quote from Kazuo Ohno, provided the audience with a connection to my butoh influences for the piece. Its words convey the cyclical nature of death and life and also represent the final image of the piece, when I am surrounded by the names and lights of the dead.

Performance

Deciding how to perform death was the greatest challenge in *Elementary Cycles*. In an attempt to make the movement as experiential as possible, I decided to not rehearse. Instead, I spent the day of the performance creating and meditating on my *butoh-fu*, with the half hour before the performance devoted to meditating in the space with my candle as the only source of light. I did, however, create a score for the performance to negotiate time and space. Fourteen water bowls were placed along three walls of the space, while an outline of my body was traced in the middle of the room to indicate where audience members could place their candles. I chose to walk between these two elements of fire and water in a circular pattern, embodying the idea of cycles. The piece would begin with my body tall and erect, my focus directed at the main candle in the center of the room, representing my life force. I would walk slowly and patiently, allowing each cycle to last several minutes. However, each cycle would also bring me closer to the ground, spine stooping, knees, hips and ankles flexing in their joints, until I would reach a crawl. The

final position would require lying face-up amidst the candles, eyes closed, body as still as possible.

I had imagined the piece lasting thirty to forty minutes in length, partially based on the expected crowd at the performance and also based on how long I felt I could maintain this meditative performance state.⁵ I wore a simple grey knee-length dress to emphasize the female body and its association with death (as I will discuss in the next chapter.) Audience members were instructed when my performance would “begin” but could come and go as they wished for the duration of the piece. Two small pieces of transparent grey cloth hung in the doorway, a veil through which the audience members must pass to enter the memorial. I imagined five to ten people experiencing the work at a time, either inside or outside of the space, and found myself overwhelmed when a large crowd of approximately fifty stood outside the doorway at the beginning of the work.⁶ Attempting to maintain a focus on the idea of death and the dying body was difficult, yet upon reflection, the opening of the piece represents a healthy living body in an erect position, someone who would be distracted by the trivialities of life.

As I became accustomed to audience members coming and going, my meditative state returned. I acquired a heightened awareness of every detail of my body, from the

5. *Elementary Cycles* was performed as part of a concert titled *Experimental Performances*, which invited proposals for works not necessarily conducive to a traditional concert setting. The performance occurred on Saturday, March 29th at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro.

6. The tension of bodies crowded outside the office increased when, within a minute of beginning the performance, the first audience candle was dropped on the main candle so that a light no longer existed in the space. The office was closed off from the audience for a few minutes, and the piece was restarted.

slight tremor of my muscles attempting to maintain a slow pace to the feeling of my toes on the carpet. I did not register many faces during my performance, particularly as I became stooped later on, but the presence of other bodies, whether obstacles in my path or observers in corners of the room, were beings of comfort rather than distractions. Whether they felt like they were experiencing the work with me or not, I felt a joint experience with them, a constant ebb and flow of bodies that all marked their existence in the space as well as the existence of many other beings no longer corporeally present. A few briefly put their hands on my back as I walked past; halfway through the piece, one participant attempted to lift my upper body from its stooped position. I remained by her in stillness, but focused on the extreme weighted-ness of the body and curving of the spine. If she had been forceful enough in her touch, my weight may not have resisted her efforts, but her touch remained a gentle gesture. Most audience members walked around the room counter-clockwise against my clockwise cycles, creating moments of pause by either me or the participants to allow one person to walk the pathway and not disrupt either the water bowls or candles. I found these moments the most interesting to navigate, feeling the tension and discomfort of some participants who were anxious to get by, the curiosity of others at my extreme proximity as I slowly passed by them. Many remained in the space for only a minute or two, but several stayed for ten or more minutes to experience the progression.

The intermediate stage between erect and crawling was extremely strenuous on my spine and quadriceps. The effort to maintain each degree of that stage for one cycle caused great fatigue by the end of the performance, and sweat dripped noticeably down

my arms as I continued circling the space. My breathing became heavier than I expected, and crawling demanded more space than I had imagined so that navigating the candles was difficult at times. Each cycle of crawling became slower and more labored; I began to rest my head on my arms between crawls before continuing on, body flattening to the ground. When only three participants remained in the space, I began my crawl to my final resting place amidst the candles. The participants, luckily, had left a small window along the outline of candles through which I could crawl. In creating the piece, I had imagined myself lifting my body over the candles to sit in the middle of the space and lay down from there, but the moment did not call for this. To remain true to this yielding to gravity, I had to stay as low to the ground as possible. I slowly lay down on my right side before rolling to my back, a few wisps of my hair catching tea lights and putting them out. The smell of singed hair filled the space, but in the moment, I did not care if my hair had caught fire; I had become a corpse.⁷

To perform this piece again, I would make many small changes, such as using a slightly larger space and only allowing a few people in to experience the work at a time. However, the concepts and ideas for this piece, including the candles, flowers, and *butoh-fu*, worked well in generating the atmosphere I had envisioned for the work. My embodiment of the movement allowed me to understand different stages in a transformation of the body to a corpse. I experienced the fatigue and tension in my body from carrying my weight in a stooped position. Surprisingly, the slow movement became

7. I also had an attendant in the space watching out for my safety and directing audience members in their use of candles and flowers.

a comfort throughout the performance; I tuned in to those who remained in the space with me for long periods of time and understood my rhythm, while I could feel resistance from others accustomed to the rush of everyday life. In watching slower pieces now, such as Maureen Fleming's *Nude Descending Stairs*, I have a corporeal response to the movements of the dancer, knowing the necessary control and meditative connection between mind and body to maintain that pace. My movement study unfortunately did not include investigations of sacrifice and gendered death, but I will be exploring these two themes in the final chapter of my paper.

CHAPTER IV

PERFORMANCES OF DEATH, PART II

My choreographic analysis in Chapter II mostly investigated isolated deaths; in other words, deaths that hold individual significance and importance. This chapter explores death as a source of social knowledge, a concept that encompasses more than just individual loss of life. The first part of this chapter studies what it means for an individual's death to be a sacrifice and how this idea is choreographed differently from isolated deaths. The second part of the chapter investigates gendered death, or the connection proliferated by woman and death. Through choreographic analysis, I will demonstrate how death is often connected both negatively and positively with a female character.

Sacrifice

The dance field could arguably be labeled as a sacrificial art due to the offering of the body as the artistic medium with which to convey an image, concept, message, or experience. According to Fraleigh and Nakamura, Tatsumi Hijikata offered that “dancers are the ones who experience surrender with their own bodies in a visceral form...Hijikata believed his dance must stand as a ritual offering at the crucial point where ‘nature bleeds’” (2006, 44-45). The dancer or choreographer as sacrificial victim, or even Chosen One when referring to *The Rite of Spring*, has often been iterated by

artists who believe they sacrifice their lives for their art. Millicent Hodson found this during her reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Sacre*, explaining, "The solitary valor of the sacrificial solo, with its relentless jumps despite exhaustion, its unremitting effort toward perfection in the face of failure, was surely an interior portrait of himself that Nijinsky left to posterity" (1996, xi). Graham also related to her sacrificial virgin: "I've always felt that if you become an artist, you are the Chosen One....There's no way, once you accept it, you can escape its sacrificial demands" (qtd. in Berg 1988, 142). However, Nijinsky and Graham's self-worth as Chosen Ones in their field highlights their individual contributions to the community, an aspect of sacrificial death that Robin May Schott argues does not fit with the model of sacrifice for communal benefit.

Schott (2010b) offers several important identifiers of sacrificial death. She begins by explaining the difference between death by choice and death by killing, as well as the importance of the chosen individual:

One central feature for understanding sacrifice is that there is a *collective* subject of sacrifice, in contrast to an individual's arbitrary use of violence. By the focus on the collectivity, I mean that when an individual makes a sacrifice, as opposed to a random killing, it is done in the name of the community. (33)

A community is a broad term that could apply to any number of ideas—a tribe, a family, a country, a religious group, etc. Schott goes on to explain that this sacrifice should be both beneficial and transformative for the community (33). Again, the idea of death as a transformation appears in a sacrifice, and as I explained earlier, the transformation can be an exchange of energy between individuals, either one to another (for example, mother to

daughter) or between an individual and a community (the sacrificial virgin.) This transformation, according to Schott, means the sacrifice is *reborn* into a new form (34). Sacrifice is an embodiment of both life and death, or “negotiates the ambivalent relation between death and birth, so that it is death that becomes the origin of new birth” (Schott 2010b, 44). Intersections between concepts explored in Chapter II and sacrificial death play a prominent role in the following choreographic analyses.

One of the most well-known examples of choreographed sacrificial death in the western canon is *The Rite of Spring*. Nijinsky’s ballet and Stravinsky’s score, both loosely based on ideas of pagan Russia, are divided into two acts: “Adoration of the Earth” and “The Sacrifice”. The first act explores the beginning stages of the ritual, with dancing maidens and games of chance. The second act is the selection of the Chosen One and her dance of sacrifice. Wilkins describes the original conception for the narrative:

Horrific as it may seem to the inhabitants of enlightened Europe (both in 1911 and 2009), the sacrifice depicted (with the intention of provoking that reaction of horror) by Stravinsky and Nijinsky was a form of self-sacrifice at the level of the community. The community offers up one of its own (not a slave or prisoner of war) as an expression of gratitude, and fear, toward Mother Nature, in hope that She will look favorably upon the seeds they sow in their fields, and upon the renewal of the race. (Wilkins 2009, 76)

Again, the sacrifice was for the betterment of the community to transform the pure body of a virgin maiden into a pleasing offering to the gods. Nijinsky choreographed this sacrifice as arguably consensual; the virgin is never touched nor forced in any way. As Eksteins describes, “The chosen maiden joined in the rite automatically, without sign of comprehension or interpretation. She submitted to a fate that transcended her. The theme

was basic and at the same time brutal” (1989, 50). The brutality may only be in the physicality of the movement; virgins of several versions of *Sacre* have reportedly fainted after the solo or claimed absolute exhaustion. From learning Hodson’s reconstructed solo, I can attest that the continuous jumping and spinning immensely drain the energy of the dancer.

So how does one embody dying while trying to remember how many jumps are next or count the number of beats until you run to stage left? Nijinsky created the sacrificial solo as his personal connection to fear, his interpretation of embodied terror. I contemplated the meaning of the sacrifice—by a game of chance, this woman finds herself chosen to be an offering of blood and flesh for the betterment of the community. She has most likely lived in this village her whole life, knowing that one day, she may be the Chosen One. Did she have options? Could she have fled to a different community? Or was she proud to play a part in allowing her people to continue to thrive and flourish? Was her fear, then, not fear that she would be picked to die but fear of the unknown and of whether her body could perform the dance, or of whether her sacrifice would indeed be enough to please the god/goddess?

These questions transform as we consider other versions of *The Rite of Spring* and their depiction of the sacrifice. Although the virgin in Nijinsky’s ballet seems to willingly dance to her death, the Chosen Ones of Martha Graham and Pina Bausch are not so complacent. The audience may feel sympathy for all sacrificial virgins, but the sympathy in Graham and Bausch’s dances cross the line into the Chosen One as a victim of societal

brutality.⁸ Schoff describes all sacrificial persons as ‘victims’, no matter their willingness in the ritual, but she emphasizes their identity as “a member of the community but not a central figure (perhaps marginal) so that he/she does not affect the community negatively with his/her death” (2010b, 35).⁹ The virgin in all three mentioned versions of *The Rite of Spring* has no prominent attributes to differentiate herself from the other maidens. The choreographers chose to clothe their virgins in the same costumes, although Bausch and Graham *transform* the costumes of their Chosen Ones after the selection process. Choreographies of communal sacrifice then demonstrate the communal transformation through an individual’s death but the individual’s significance and contribution as a singular person is demonstrated in the narrative through a sacrifice, not through differentiating characteristics.

However, sacrifice is also explored in choreography through the mother figure. Schott describes Luce Irigaray’s emphasis on motherhood as “the fundamental sacrifice that society does not acknowledge” (2010b, 39). Ohno certainly acknowledged the importance of the mother in his choreographies, as does Preljocaj. The opening sacrifice in *Blanche Neige* of the mother’s death during her daughter’s birth demonstrates the fragility of the body in metamorphosis as well as the stress put on the body to sustain another life. The mother’s spiritual return later in the ballet, to care for her daughter when she appears dead from the poison apple, exemplifies the love and bond shared between

8. Victim vs. martyr depictions of the Chosen One were analyzed in Chapter II.

9. I would categorize this as a pagan outlook on communal sacrifices. In many religious practices, such as Christianity, the identity of the individual can be extremely important to the sacrifice.

the two beings, even though the mother never knew the daughter. Although only appearing in two short scenes, the mother figure and her sacrifice play an important role in the overall narrative of the ballet, which will be explored further in the next section.

Gendered Death

Death is often viewed as a universal, apolitical idea experienced by all humans equally; butoh practitioners in particular often speak about attempting to shed social constructions to reach universal experiences of birth and death. Yet birth and death are highly political, social, and economic in nature, ideas that should greatly factor into discussions of choreographed death.¹⁰ For the last section of this paper, however, I will be focusing mostly on gendered death, specifically the choreographic relation of women and death. Schott's discussion of the association of women with death traces the relation back to Pandora's box as well as to Eve, the harbinger of sin and thus death (2010a, 5-6). Woman as embodiment of temptation, sin, all things associated with the flesh, correlates to the 'material other' so "that which is a hostile other—the flesh, and death as the radical other of life—becomes attributed to woman" (Schott 2010a, 6). Yet in Schott's description, life and death are not seen as cyclical and intertwined but as a dualism, demonstrating the mind/body split and male/female binary so often found in philosophy.

Yet in the four main pieces that I have analyzed in this paper (*The Dying Swan*, *The Rite of Spring* (Nijinsky, Bausch, and Graham versions), *Nude Descending Stairs*,

10. Two wonderful examples are Michel Foucault's discussion of biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* and Achille Mbembe's conception of necropolitics in his article "Necropolitics".

and *Blanche Neige*) a woman or several women die. Of course, I could have easily found and analyzed four pieces in which a male or several males die, but to *not* intentionally search for four works of female death and yet to find myself in the position of only analyzing female deaths is hardly coincidental. Perhaps a woman's death is just more easily choreographed or conceptualized with a body already buried in the symbolism and metaphor of the 'female'. A male sacrificial virgin in *The Rite of Spring*, although choreographed,¹¹ is certainly not very common in the hundreds of versions that have been created over the past century. Of course, the female as a fertile being symbolizes a greater sacrifice to the gods at spring than a male. As Schott explains, "Both women and death are also associated with fertility. Women manifestly give birth to new life, and death gives birth to new life, as in the concept of resurrection" (Schott 2010b, 28). In contrast to Schott's earlier commentary on female as the 'other' or opposite of life, fertility reconnects woman and death in the life/death/rebirth cycle explored in Chapter II.

However, recreations of *Sacre* after Nijinsky go far beyond female as sacrifice in their choreographies of gender. Pina Bausch, for example, premiered her *Rite of Spring* in 1975 to help feed her *Tanztheater* rebellion. According to Susan Manning (2008), "Bausch's *Sacre* questioned why a woman invariably serves as the victim of social violence...Bausch made gender an issue in *Sacre*, and after her staging any choreographer who presented female self-sacrifice as a given risked the charge of old-fashionedness" (146). By hyper-emphasizing the female as victim, Bausch demonstrated

11. Two examples include versions by Glen Tetley (1974) and Meryl Tankard (2009). Maurice Béjart (1959) also choreographed a *Sacre* with both a female and a male sacrificed.

that gendered sacrifice should not be assumed as a cultural or social norm. As the curtain rises on her piece, a woman is laying prone on a dirt-covered stage, a pleasant expression on her face, and a piece of red cloth (revealed later as a dress) acting as her pillow. Symbolizing the uninformed or complacent public, the woman is grossly ignorant of the significance of her chosen headrest. Later in the piece, with the subsequent increased chaos of the score, the red cloth is tossed between the women in a game of hot potato until one unlucky victim is left standing. A man viciously grabs her, dragging her backward. In reference to Nijinsky's original "Chosen One" solo, the woman begins frenetically dancing around the stage, patrolled by the shirtless men who prevent her from escaping. This is hardly the climax of the piece, as Bausch's first choice is not her last. Throughout the selection process, multiple victims accumulate: one physically grabbed and forced to dance, one raped by the men, one publicly killed for the spring.

In Martha Graham's version, which premiered in 1984, the choice of maiden is simpler; a shaman (a role which replaced Nijinsky's original sage) overlooks the mating dances until he suddenly plucks one woman off the back of her partner. As the shaman cruelly torments the Chosen One, her upper body convulses, her chest squirming, as if her heart is racing too quickly for her body. Perhaps due to fear of the shaman's power, the other women make no effort to come to her aid and even help to physically transform the virgin's hair and dress before the rite. Female complacency is apparent in all three versions of the *Rite*, although more so in Graham's and Bausch's versions where man rather than fate selects the unlucky victim.

Neither Graham nor Bausch provide any commentary on their demonstration of male violence against the female community, demonstrating the perpetuation of patriarchal societies rather than sending any particular activist message or providing a solution or alternative social structure. Preljocaj, on the other hand, in his *Blanche Neige*, makes a clear statement about vanity and the negative social lens on the aging body. Rosita Boisseau provides commentary on Preljocaj's frequent use of sexuality and sexual attraction in his choreography:

...la sexualité est au coeur du conte. Plus que sa beauté, la méchante reine sait qu'elle va perdre son attrait sexuel. Elle doit accepter de vieillir. A l'heure du lifting qui joue la confusion des âges, des générations et des saisons, ce conte rappelle tout bonnement que le temps est inéluctable, que la fille replace la mère, fût-elle sa belle-mère, ainsi va la vie, aussi implacable soit-elle. (Boisseau 2008)

...sexuality is at the heart of the story. More than her beauty, the evil queen knows that she is going to lose her sexual attraction. She must accept aging. In a time of facelifts, that causes confusion of ages, generations, and seasons, this story recalls very simply that time is inevitable, that the daughter replaces the mother, in this case her step-mother; thus is life, as tough as it may be.

The evil queen's desire for sexual attraction is greatly emphasized in her costuming; when she strips off her cape, a black leotard with a long slit down the front from her throat to her pubic bone is revealed and is the costume in which she dies. All women in the piece, however, act as flirtatious characters, including Snow White; the court dancing and forest frolicking certainly accentuate the sexual availability of the young women. The only exclusion from this is Snow White's birth mother.

Yet her only appearances onstage are associated with death. Besides her opening scene, in which she dies in childbirth, the mother returns once Snow White has fallen victim to the poison apple. The mother flies down, still covered in all black, to carry her daughter's body back up into the sky with her (presumably to heaven.) She lifts her off the ground a few feet, but in discovering that her daughter is still alive, she returns her to a supine position on the ground. Preljocaj has found that audiences often believe the mother in this scene is supposed to represent death, a type of grim reaper, which was not his intent:

Donc l'identification entre la mort, la mère, cette espece de contresens, la mere qui donne la naissance et qui revient la chercher au moment de la mort, comme pour boucler un cycle, est une idee qui me paraissait interessante dans la dramaturgie du ballet, d'autant qu'elle pouvait, en la laissant sur place et en repartant seule, montrer qu'elle ne l'avait qu'une apparence de la mort. ("Angelin Preljocaj", 3)

Therefore, the identification between death, the mother, this kind of misinterpretation, the mother who gives birth and who comes back to find her at the moment of death, complete a cycle, is an idea that seemed interesting to me in the dramaturgy of the ballet, especially since it could, by [the mother] leaving her there and departing alone, show that she only had the appearance of death.

Here, Preljocaj reintroduces the mother as a continuation of the life/death/rebirth cycle, not as a metaphor for death. Her demonstration of fertility in the piece further emphasizes her connection to this cycle, in opposition to the evil queen who has no children of her own and feels no motherly affection for her step-daughter. The cycle is arguably broken by the evil queen, an 'other' who represents an imbalance of corporeal desires. Yet the patriarchal idea that a woman is defined by her fertility, and one who cannot or chooses

not to bear children is less of a woman, is emphasized in this contrast of Snow White's mother and step-mother. Preljocaj, Bausch, and Graham thus demonstrate extremes of gender duality and death, producing choreographies that call for analytical discussion and questioning of gendered representations and experiences of staged deaths.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has explored distinct choreographies of death that differ across movement style, use of narrative, symbolism, metaphor, emphasis on gender, association with birth and life, and philosophical interpretations. Choreographers and performances at times make a definitive choice to dismiss a realistic depiction or embodiment of death, instead constructing a dramatic performance with aesthetically stimulating choreography. Others view performance and reality in a symbiotic relationships, resulting in a shared experience of the dying body between the audience and performers. The goal of this paper was not to value one approach over the other, but to analyze the wide spectrum of options for a danced death and the resultant audience observations, reactions, and experiences. The works chosen for this paper are choreographies and performances of death that resonated with me, but they are certainly not the only or "best" examples of death onstage. Further investigation of staged deaths, using other works as examples, will hopefully reveal even more themes and trends that occur in performances of the dying body.

The themes I investigated in this paper intersected across one or more of the works chosen for this research, but their isolation into separate subheadings in no way

signifies their lack of connection. As was explained in many sections, these concepts are often heavily intertwined in their philosophical or psychological analyses as well as visual translations into movement. For example, the life/death/rebirth cycle is at times difficult to disconnect from the performer's embodiment of transformation, as demonstrated by Maureen Fleming's *Nude Descending Stairs* and Angelin Preljocaj's *Blanche Neige*. Similarly, the life/death/rebirth cycle has often been symbolized or experienced by female bodies onstage rather than males due to the social associations of death with woman; Preljocaj's conceptualization of the role of Snow White's mother within his ballet is a prime example of these two concepts heavily intertwined with one another.

However, the separation of these ideas did aid in choreographing my own piece, *Elementary Cycles*. Although many of my symbols and movement images encompassed several ideas in one, I could deconstruct these choreographic decisions based on examples of other performances of death to narrow my focus to the experience I wished to create for myself as the dancer as well as for the audience as viewers and participants. My hope is that others, in gaining a greater understanding of the choreographic potentialities in dancing death onstage, will likewise have clarity of intention when dealing with these concepts. Does this death necessitate a narrative explanation or can it stand alone as a body becoming a corpse? What advantages or disadvantages exist in staging a dramatic death rife with symbols and metaphors versus an experiential death that attempts to embody the dying process? How does this death also connect to life and birth? What social and political agendas are imbedded in this portrayal of death, and does

a connection exist between death and the female body? As we move forward, hopefully these questions will be taken into greater consideration by choreographers and spark new ideas and concepts of how to embody death onstage.

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